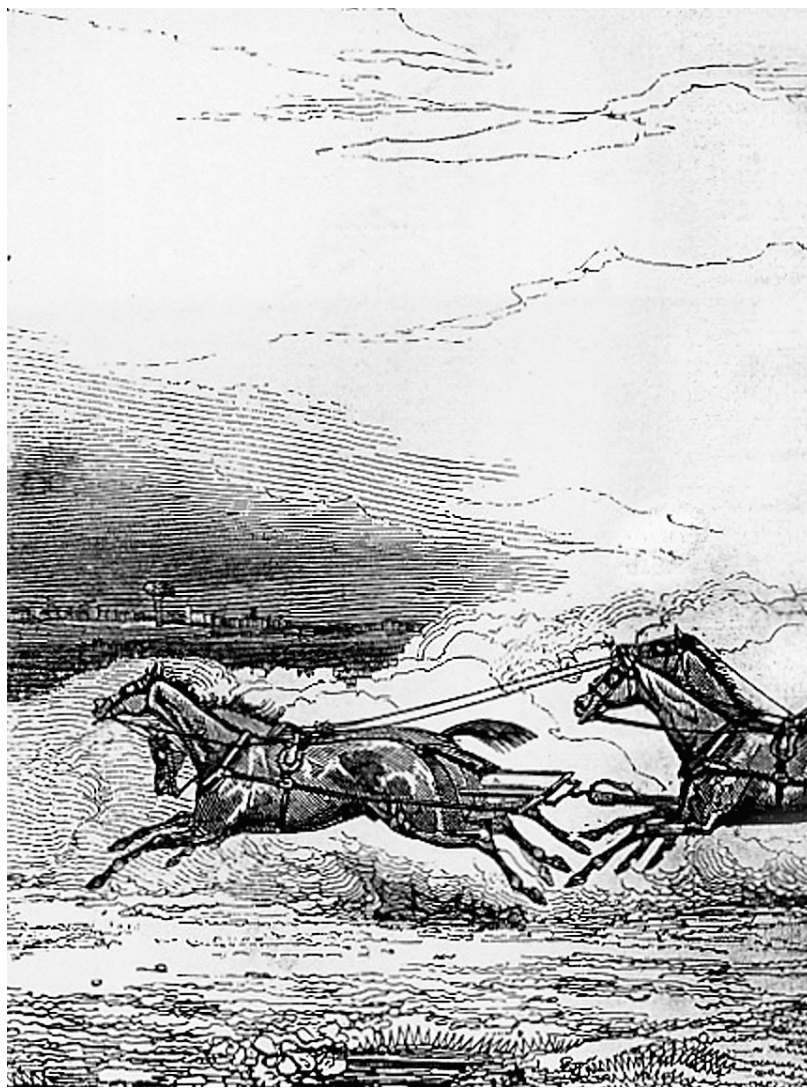


Henry Aiken. *The Road*.  
Published in *The Chace, the Turf,*  
*and the Road*, 1837.





# Three Pieces of Asphalt

JEFFREY T. SCHNAPP

*Vitrified Pipe & Culvert: Turning high-ways into dry-ways*

## Friction

Asphalt erupts on the scene of modernity to redeem the world of industry from the banes of friction and dust. Dust clouds had been around since the beginning of time. But the coaching revolution of the nineteenth century transformed them into signifiers of accelerated movement long before the appearance of the “stream” or motion lines that would indicate velocity in twentieth-century cartooning and graphics. Dust was also what differentiated driver-passengers from pedestrians, the enfranchised from the disenfranchised, within the contours of a nation-state now defined as a transportation grid. The former were the clean, well-dressed dust producers; the latter had little choice but to breathe in clouds of dust (just as today bicyclists inhale motorists’ fumes). Dust was the pollutant of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Asphalt came to the rescue. It cleaned up speed.

The pedestrian’s revenge on driver-passengers came in the form of friction. *Attrito*, *friction*, *Reibung*: these are but a few of the words that capture the emergence of a new form of resistance between moving vehicles and their immobile supports. Long before the advent of travel by automobile, travel on land, whether on horseback or in carriages, implied overcoming potentially ominous physical obstacles. The atmosphere, hostile peoples, topographical barriers, all ensured that every voyage, from the time of Odysseus to that of Goethe, would be an adventure. To these must be added the erratic support provided by premodern pathways and roadways, thanks to which every attempt to traverse a landscape or even a city street meant confronting ruts, sitting water, unpredictable surfaces. It also meant having to endure swaying to the point of nausea, saddle sores, long successions of bumps and jolts.

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revolutions in road building associated with names such as Trésaguet, Telford, and McAdam inaugurated the modern dream of smooth, frictionless travel. But they did so by increasing the speeds attained by conveyances, which merely translated premodern bumps and jolts into a harsh new language of trauma and shock. Since the new roadways were composite surfaces made up of compressed earth, stone, crushed gravel, and lime, and since systematic approaches to drainage were still uncommon, they also



brought with them an even more venerable bane than ruts and dust: viscous mud.

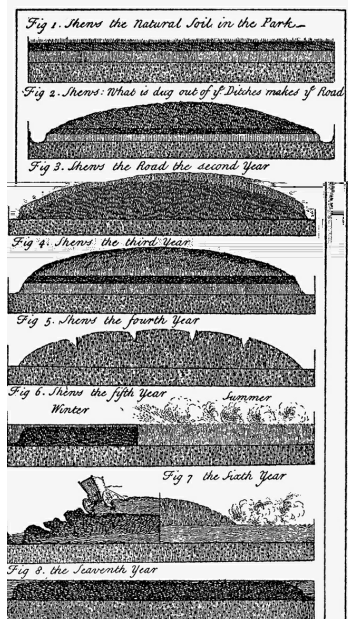
All this, asphalt would remedy, whether applied to sidewalks (Count Sassenay, Paris, 1838), to highways (M. Mérian, Travers, Switzerland, 1849), or to city streets (M. Vaudry, Paris, 1854). The initial experience of asphalt pavements was one of such attenuated resistance, reinforced in turn by the separation of roadways from sidewalks and by developments in suspension technology, that asphalt soon becomes enshrined within the modern imaginary as the material of frictionlessness.<sup>2</sup> If, from an economic standpoint, modernity's dream is the unimpeded circulation of commodities and persons, and, from a phenomenological standpoint, the experience of unimpeded psychic and somatic flow, then asphalt asserts itself as the era's invisible but ubiquitous support. The practical necessities of transport and travel, the rituals and expressions of new forms of selfhood, and modern cultures of recreation from tennis to motor sports to skateboarding will all unfold on an asphalt stage.

Frictionlessness, of course, is little more than a metaphysical fantasy. It represents a secularized version of the transcendental imaginary that once attributed frictionless high-speed travel to the gods. The world after the death of God, however, is a world of skinned knees and fraying tires, a world where every time that friction diminishes, movement accelerates, rendering contact with the pavement ever more wounding and abrupt. It is a world ruled by accidents behind the spectacle of which hums the everyday fact of the mechanical wear and tear that accompanies rapid mechanical motion. Today, thanks to the asphalt revolution, bumps and jolts may have become exceptions, and smoothness and regularity the rule. But the abiding reality of friction reasserts itself, in spectacular form, in the accident and, in productive form, in the controlled stick and slide of speeding wheels.

Asphalt comes not to bury friction but only to alter its nature. The course of technological development is reversed as a result. Until the

Left: *The Road's Progress.*  
Published in John Loudon  
McAdam, *Remarks on the  
Present System of Road  
Making*, 1823.

Right: *His Job Is Waiting.*  
Published in *Better Roads  
and Streets*, Sept. 1913.



widespread diffusion of asphalt roadways, the principal challenge for engineers had consisted in *reducing* adhesion to the surface of the road: in freeing wheels and feet from the ground being traversed. After asphalt, wheels and feet have been emancipated; they are no longer grounded. So engineers strive instead to *increase* traction, thereby giving rise to a productive new conception of friction that recovers the world's sexual roots. Friction is frication, *frottage*, *sfregamento*, *Reibung*: a rubbing together of surfaces, violent and erotic at once, that induces forgetfulness and bliss. The pedestrian walks about as if in a dream state never looking down at his or her feet. The driver is transfigured into a modern god in the wake of whose passage fields of rubber pellets, skid marks, vehicle fragments and viscous liquids are scattered across the smooth surfaces of the modern roadway-reliquary.

*National Standard Paving Machines: What does noise mean? It means energy lost.*

### Riding the razor's edge

*Velox Street Indicators: Prevent accidents—Stop corner cutting.*

Asphalted pavement doesn't constitute the necessary precondition for modern motor sports such as grand prix motorcycle racing. (Rally, dirt-bike, and power-boat racing prove the contrary.) But asphalt remains the normative support for speed, its global vernacular.

An experienced road racer reads a circuit like a Tuareg reads the desert sands or a soothsayer reads the palm of her own hand. On every circuit he perceives lines, some clean, some not; braking, turn-in, exit, and shift points; patches, seams, debris fields; rough and smooth spots; an overall level of stick or slipperiness—all informed by the technical characteristics of his bike. Every circuit discloses a universe of pavement

Left: Bruno Paul. Cover art for *Jugend*, August 1896.

Right: *The Race of Death*. Published in *Punch*, 3 June 1903.



variations that speak a language of their own. To begin to translate this private language into a public practice of riding involves a gradual process of familiarization: getting to know the powers and limits of the asphalt's grip, moving one's mental and physical markers forward and back, testing alternative lines in tandem with alternative suspension, tire, and gearing setups. Through trial and error, an ideal performance is gradually crafted that is every bit as precise as the steps that make up a ballet recital. The circuit is marked with a series of invisible action points that must be "hit" with clockwork precision lap after lap. If one is missed, adjustments have to be made for a whole succession of subsequent actions until the time-space sequence is back on track: throttle on or brakes on, downshift or upshift, increase or reduce the lean angle, tighten or widen the line, spin the rear wheel out or keep it in tight, skim the asphalt with your knee or tuck it into the side of the bike.

Because asphalt provides the stage, its every irregularity becomes integral to the show. At once the rider's dearest friend and the foe that punishes every balletic misstep, the asphalt must become a kind of second nature, a firm but slippery second skin experienced at a slight remove: by means of the prosthetic extensions known as tires. Every serious racer makes his peace with the fact that tires have a life and a mind of their own. No two sets are exactly alike, despite all the advances in materials science and production technologies. The same goes for the characteristics of a circuit's asphalt. Some circuits shred tires prematurely, others are gentler. Some compounds or tire profiles stick well on a given circuit or in given conditions or with a given rider and setup but won't last a full race; others will last but don't stick well; others still, will neither adhere nor endure. The pavement's viscosity and grain; the coating of matted rubber, tar, and oil; its temperature and contours all play a determining role along with the suspension characteristics of the bike and the driver's riding style (no two are exactly alike). Racing is a realm of dissimilitude.



For the spectator the circuit looms alluringly at a distance in its ideal geometry, abstract and smooth; for the rider it rushes forth in all of its gritty particularity, and as speed increases so does sensitivity to and intimacy with the pavement's smallest variations. Grip is always relative, and the lingua franca of high-level motorcycle competition is that of the (sometimes barely) controlled slide. A race bike weaves and bobs with undulations, gear shifts, and applications of throttle and brake. It maneuvers like a platform that, however firm, both tilts forward and backward and skates side to side. Braking loads the front; acceleration loads the back. Turns induce slides influenced by the front- or back-loading of the suspension; the throttle will crack the rear wheel loose in a vortex of rubber and smoke if the dosage is sudden; hard braking will slide the front. The strip available for corrections, errors, and passing gets smaller and smaller as velocity approaches race pace. The "line" narrows from a broad swath to a razor's edge on each side of which lie potential disasters: the disaster of dirt, grass, gravel traps, and candy stripes on the inside; the disaster of debris fields of balled rubber, oil, and slick pavement on the outside. To be competitive on an asphalt stage is to inhabit that ultrathin line that separates mastery from catastrophe.

The actual race bears an only partial relation to the ideal, for, in the heat of battle, fairings bang against one another; rival riders dive in and out of imaginary or actual spaces; there are flags, pit boards, and crashes to monitor; the perfect line proves elusive. Most of all, there is a swirl of vibration, commotion, and noise that bears little relation to the smooth high-speed choreography experienced from high atop the stands. Fatigue sets in, legs cramp up, and sweat condenses in helmets as the entire world vanishes into the hallucinatory tunnel vision of the race. No racer enters the tunnel except as a tightly wound ball of nerves. No racer exits it successfully without learning to wed total concentration with no less total relaxation. In the frenzied Zen of motorcycle racing, the razor's edge is inhabited on the tarmac but honed in the mind.

*Buvez Jifran: L'apertif au goudron*

## **Tarmac lit**

*Trinidad Liquid Asphalt for Road Surfacing: Our motto is "always forward"*

The triumph of asphalt as a paving surface is accompanied by the material's relative invisibility in twentieth-century literature. Few are the singers of asphalt georgics like the one that concludes the engineer Pedro Juan Larrañaga's *Successful Asphalt Paving*:

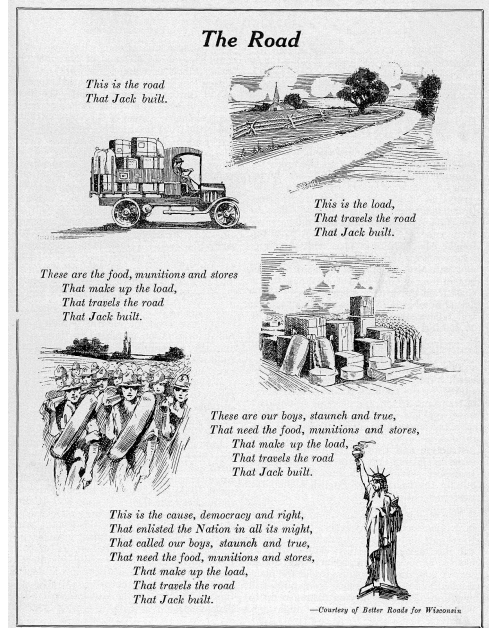


The world today stands at the beginning of the Road Transport Era, with which is intimately linked an era of Hygienization. A clean weatherproof road surface becomes the channel of civilization, along which the other gifts can flow. This clean road will contribute more to education and to the raising of the standard of living than any other known channel. The clean road will be the meeting place of democracy; the Rolls-Royce limousine, the Ford tourer, the cycle and the donkey cart will learn to know and respect each other.<sup>3</sup>

Asphalt may be everywhere within the modern landscape, from highways to sidewalks to courtyards to rooftops to suburban parking lots. It may well promote hygiene, civilization, and democracy. Or, as its critics will counter, it may instead reinforce social control, promote alienation and delinquency, drive nature and humanity from the industrial metropolis. Yet, aside from a brief bubble of excitement in the second half of the nineteenth century, it will mostly be relegated to the domain of the necessary but presupposed. The literature of asphalt is less a literature of pavements than of vehicles, drivers, cyclists, passengers, pedestrians, cops, and thugs. The tarmac hovers beneath the perceived surface of the modern landscape like a hidden god.

The ubiquity = invisibility paradox has powerful precedents in Western road literature. From the epic of Gilgamesh to Virgil's *Aeneid* and beyond, travel narratives long highlighted the perils of sea voyages, but when describing travel on land they favored description of bandits, monsters, and prodigies over attention to the roadway's physical characteristics. The knights of medieval romance thus speed through forests atop their glistening steeds with no less indifference to what is underfoot than do the runners of ancient Greece across the plain of Marathon. Even as meticulous a poet as Dante tells us next to nothing about the contours of the *diritta via [che] era smarrita* [the straight path that was lost], but a great deal about the surrounding landscape, its spiritual significance, his inner state.

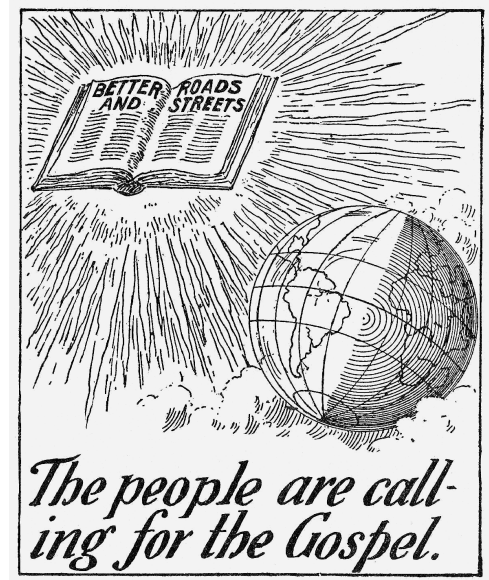
This regime of descriptive omission starts to shift when scientifically built turnpikes and city



Top: *The Road*. Cover of *The Highway Magazine*, February 1918.

Bottom: *The People are Calling for the Gospel*. Published in *Better Roads and Streets*, January 1915.

Opposite: H. Wiatt. *Mock-Adamizing*. Published in R. Devereux, *The Colossus of Roads*, 1936.





streets begin to displace premodern and early modern roads, thanks to the revolution inaugurated by Trésaguet, Telford, and McAdam in the late-eighteenth century and brought to term in the present age of asphalt. No longer understood as self-supporting artificial constructions akin to buildings or as informal byways subject to every whim of nature, modern roadways and city streets assume the form of a kind of *artificial or enhanced nature*, a smooth and impermeable membrane thinly applied over a natural ground. The symbolic impact of the shift is as significant as its practical consequences. From fortresslike emblems of human resistance to a hostile natural landscape, roads evolve instead into intimate prolongations of the rural and urban landscapes to which they grant access—but under new conditions of cleanliness, constancy, and perceptibility. Rapid or unhindered movement, irrespective of season or climate, becomes routine; jolting, rocking, and noise are reduced; circulation becomes the norm. All of which nourishes a new sociopolitical imaginary that envisages transportation networks—be they Parisian boulevards, English turnpikes, or American superhighways—as the arterial system of a living collective body and driving/walking/cycling within them as a form of intensified communion with the collectivity or connection to the world. In short, macadam and its successor, tarmac, become privileged staging grounds for mobile concepts of selfhood, statehood, and society.

Two interrelated road literatures arise as a result. On the one hand, the Western literary imagination discovers the romance of the narrow footpath, the remote byway, the ancient Roman road in ruin, the mountain trail, the “off road” and “off the beaten path.” All are embraced as the emblems of a simpler, less crowded, more adventurous era or ethos. All are imagined as “closer” to nature, irrespective of the degree of violence they inflict on the landscape. To these various “offroad” roadways a legion of late-nineteenth century books will be dedicated bearing nostalgic titles such as *The Brighton Road: Speed, Sport and History on the Classic Highway* and *Au bon vieux temps des diligences*, much as today, in the era of superhighways and intercontinental air travel, off-road adventure travel proliferates alongside waves of nostalgia for once major

but now minor asphalt rural byways such as Route 66 (the “Mother Road” in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, a literature proper of the macadam and asphalt comes into being, com-



posed in an alternately enchanted or disenchanted key. The oscillation is familiar from the writings of De Quincey and Baudelaire. Smooth modern pavements provide a platform for exploring new modes of consciousness and desire shaped by the love of evanescence, novelty, surprise, and speed. They also open up an arena where cars, carriages, and horses form a “moving chaos out of which death gallops forth from all sides at once”: a nightmarish realm, that is, of violent collisions between the ideal and the real, between speed-induced reveries and the harsh materiality of the tarmac, between aspirations to social justice and new freedoms and the enduring fact of injustice and subjugation.<sup>5</sup>

This second literature finds its homeland on the freshly tarred sidewalks and streets of nineteenth-century Paris. Straightened and paved by Louis Napoleon, they were experienced as a magic carpet ride by early visitors such as the protagonists of Zola’s *La Curée*:

They continued to roll and it seemed to them that the car was gliding along a carpet as it descended that infinite, ruler-straight roadway that had been rigorously designed so that they could avoid the dark alleyways. Every boulevard became a hallway of their hotel. The sun’s joy smiled on the fresh facades, lit up their windows, struck the canopies of boutiques and cafés, warmed up the asphalt under the hurried steps of the crowd.<sup>6</sup>

The city qua hotel provides a thrilling home away from home where the carpetlike roadway becomes identified with that sense of desublimation, expanded agency, and joyous fear that, in his essay *The English Mail Coach*, De Quincey had called “the glory of motion.”<sup>7</sup> Here and elsewhere within this new literature (which will reach its apogee more than a century later in novels such as Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*), motion, whether urban or rural, is “glorious” because it unbinds and thereby creates the preconditions for new, intensified, unexpected couplings. So much so that for Zola’s Renée even the vicarious observation of sidewalk traffic is enough to stir up long-buried desires:

With her head in the doorway, Renée stood silently observing the crowds, cafés, and restaurants, an endless succession of which paraded before her. She had become deeply serious, lost in the sort of vague longings that make up the reveries of women. That ample sidewalk, swept by girls’ dresses and resonating with the distinct and familiar sound of men’s boots; that gray asphalt across which galloped pleasures and easy loves, awakened dormant desires. It made her forget the idiotic dance which she had left behind and allowed her instead to contemplate joys far more refined.<sup>8</sup>

M. Duse. Pirelli advertisement.  
Published in *Rivista illustrata  
del Popolo d'Italia*, May 1938.

The boulevard seduces because it constitutes an artificial paradise whose pleasures are clean, quick, and inexhaustible. It glows under the perpetual light of gas lamps and the sun. Arcades, restaurants, and cafés are its flora. Its fauna is a new humanity composed of pavement-pounding, asphalt-adoring *flâneurs* and *flâneuses*: as the literature would have it, drivers, passengers, businessmen, shoppers, ladies, bohemians, artists, prostitutes, gypsies, and wandering Jews. Its oceans assume the form of surging crowds.<sup>9</sup> Fashion provides the seasonal variations.<sup>10</sup> Capital and credit provide the fuel. Asphalt sustains all the glitz and gloss.

It may come as a surprise to contemporary readers for whom asphalt belongs to the blasé realm of the everyday that the literary imagination of Zola's era compacted this mobile metropolitan universe into glistening images of the tarmac itself, whether diurnal or nocturnal. An abundance of descriptions confirm the point. "After the shower," the Goncourts encounter "washed asphalt, brilliant with white reflections, sparkles, shadows stretched as if across water."<sup>11</sup> Zola waxes lyrical in a similar vein, fondly recalling when "the cafés alone were still flickering away and streaking the asphalt with sheets of light."<sup>12</sup> For Léon in *Madame Bovary*, contact with a smooth black pavement transfigures every woman into a potential object of desire. Indeed, he scorns "all that which doesn't tread the boulevard with a glossy foot."<sup>13</sup> The conceit recurs in Maupassant as a full-blown asphalt apotheosis:

Gay and trembling, the crowd advanced under the fiery haze and seemed as if in the midst of an apotheosis. Faces were gilded.

Purple reflections shot through black hats and clothing. The sheen of shoes kindled flames on the asphalt sidewalk.<sup>14</sup>

The scenario recurs elsewhere in the new literature of the tarmac. The flow is smooth but there are secret frictions in the crowd. Dresses sweep the walkway, stirring up fields of static electricity. These collect in well-shod female feet. Sparks shoot out, flames erupt. The shock is discharged and induces muscular spasms at the moment of contact:

Boulevards are what most enthrall me about Paris. Every morning when I arrive and cross one, my feet experience the galvanic contraction produced





by that same asphalt sidewalk across which, every evening, so many prostitutes shuffle their shoes and sweep their noisy dresses. When the hour comes at which gas-jets shine in mirrors and knives clatter against marble tables, I set out on a peaceful walk, immersed in the smoke of my cigar, looking straight through every woman who passes. Here prostitution spreads out its wares. Here eyes twinkle! I have no idea where I'll be spending the night.<sup>15</sup>

Everything shines—eyes, faces, mirrors, flames—against and atop the glistening black pitch. Everything is on display, on sale, on the move. The streetlights may still be burning gas, but the sidewalk is always already electrified. Its asphalt is hot, labile, sexed up like the freeway flyways of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* where cars come to collide and collide to come.<sup>16</sup>

It now becomes possible to address the question of what, from the standpoint of the imaginary of modern materials, asphalt *added* to the prior culture of macadam, aside from practicalities like reduced friction and the elimination of mud. The answer lies in its double nature as a product of the era of industry and as a naturally occurring malodorous, combustible mixture of hydrocarbons. The former ties asphalt to progress and to the mobile glamour of the here and the now; the latter to primeval residues formed over many millennia out of Paleozoic sludge.<sup>17</sup> Asphalt is *Jew's pitch*, mobile but fixed, filthy but clean, archaic but of the future. A techno-primitive compound, it contributes not only to "the glory of motion" but also to the resurfacing of elemental urges and certitudes: raw sexuality, violence, tyranny, crime, and corruption. Just as the former animates the enchanted literature of the tarmac, so the latter animates its disenchanting double. For it, pitch and tar are hot infernal substances, associated not with freedom but with confinement and bondage. The boulevard becomes the fifth *bolgia* of Dante's Hell. The artificial paradise turns into an asphalt jungle—such as the one immortalized in W.R. Burnett's 1949 novel and John Huston's 1950 film of the same title—whose voice is the police radio with its endless succession of accidents, assaults, robberies, and homicides.<sup>18</sup> Or the flip side of the same torrid coin: the asphalt desert.

Rimbaud was among the first explorers of this nightmarish realm in his prose poem "Métropolitain":

From indigo straits to Ossian's seas, on pink and orange sands  
bathed by vinous skies, crystal boulevards have freshly risen and  
crisscrossed, settled by poor young families fed by greengrocers.  
Nothing rich—The city!

From the bituminous desert, in headlong flight with sheets of fog  
stretched in dreary bands across a sky that bends, recedes, descends,

Piero Portaluppi. *Il problema della circolazione a Milano*.  
Published in *Guerino Meschino*,  
31 August 1924.

made of the most sinister black smoke that the Ocean in mourning can produce: helmets, wheels, boats, rumps—The battle!<sup>19</sup>

Behind the glossy surfaces of crystal boulevards lies the harsh truth of the bituminous desert. The visionary flees the city and seeks out the higher reality of battle. But there are many whom he leaves behind. Among them is the poet-prisoner of Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, who is hemmed into a lifeless world in which "Silently we went round and round, / The slippery asphalte yard; / Silently we went round and round / And no man spoke a word"; a world in which "The very mud cried out for blood, / To the thirsty asphalte ring: / And we knew that ere one dawn grew fair / Some prisoner had to swing."<sup>20</sup>

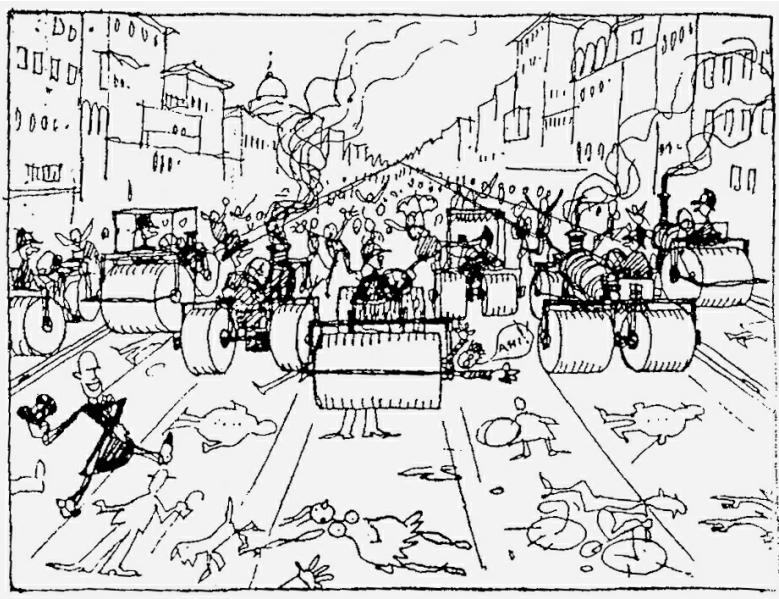
The "yard" of the modern prison is always paved: for the "safety" and "protection" of the prisoners.

This negative potential was already perceived by early observers of the tarmac, such as Mark Twain. In Twain's mind, the magic carpet was simply another weapon in Louis Napoleon's war chest:

He is annihilating the crooked streets and building in their stead noble boulevards as straight as an arrow—avenues which a cannon ball could traverse from end to end without meeting an obstruction more irresistible than the flesh and bones of men—boulevards whose stately edifices will never afford refuges and plotting places for starving, discontented revolution breeders. The mobs used to riot there, but they must seek another rallying point in future. And this ingenious Napoleon paves the streets of his great cities with a smooth, compact composition of asphaltum and sand. No more barricades of flagstones—no more assaulting his majesty's troops with cobbles.<sup>21</sup>

In the hurried steps of the festive urban crowd Twain hears the hoof beat of marching troops; in the flow of traffic he perceives not freedom but cannon balls hurtling toward unruly mobs; behind the gallop

of pleasures and furtive loves he sees a tyrant's will to subdue. But just as the removal of cobblestones disarms the urban proletariat, so it arms the middle classes, caricatured in Victor Hugo's *Stability Is Guaranteed* as friends of the tarmac and foes of 1789 and 1848:



Strolling out along the asphalt and macadam,  
I earn my daily three hundred francs on the market,  
Money today flows just like water from a spring;  
Masons make three pounds and ten pence,  
Superb; deep down inside, Paris makes sense.<sup>22</sup>

For the poem's speaker, unlike Hugo, it all makes perfect sense. The modern metropolis and its tentacular highways may forever be changing, but stability is ensured by a new socioeconomic reality founded upon speculation, credit, and the assumption of risk. And as commodities circulate and money flows, so does humanity in an age of asphalt that remains our own, alternately enchanted and disenchanted with the ride.

Tarvia: *The modern road binder—preserves roads, prevents dust (dust is expensive).*



## Notes

1. “It is a matter of common knowledge that our great infantile mortality is largely attributable to dust, and that the inhaling of dust—organic and inorganic—laden air of the public highways seriously affects the throat, nose, and lungs. That it is the cause of sore throat, nasal catarrh, and phthisis, and that it is generally conducive to a low state of health is a fact recognized by the medical profession.” [J. Walker Smith, *Dustless Roads Tar Macadam—A Practical Treatise for Engineers, Surveyors, and Others* (London: Charles Griffin & Co., 1909), 1.]

2. Frictionlessness was first formulated by McAdam: “These [founding] principles [of the modern roadway] are, that a road ought to be considered as an artificial flooring forming a strong, smooth, solid surface, at once capable of carrying great weight, and over which carriages may pass without meeting any impediment.” [John Loudon McAdam, *Remarks on the Present System of Road Making* (London: Longman, 1823), 37.]

3. Pedro Juan Larrañaga, *Successful Asphalt Paving: A Description of Up-to-Date Methods, Recipes and Theories, with Examples and Practical Hints, for Road Authorities, Contractors, and Advanced Students* (Richard Clay: London, 1926).

4. The literary careers of late-nineteenth-century popular writers such as Charles G. Harper were largely built around old- and off-road themes. Harper was the author of, among many other works, *The Dover Road; Annals of an Ancient Turnpike* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1895); *The Portsmouth Road and Its Tributaries: To-day and in Days of Old* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1895); *The Bath Road; History, Fashion, & Frivolity on an Old Highway* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1899); *The Newmarket, Bury, Thetford, and Cromer Road; Sport and History on an East Anglian Turnpike* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1904); and *The Brighton Road; Speed, Sport, and History on the Classic Highway to the South* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1906). He also authored motorcar, motorcycle, and bicycle touring guidebooks.

5. “[C]e chaos mouvant où la mort arrive au galop de tous les côtés à la fois.” Charles Baudelaire, “Perte d’aureole,” in *Petits Poèmes en prose, Le Spleen de Paris*, ed. H. Lemantre (Paris: Dunod, 1997), 48.

6. “Ils roulaient toujours, et il leur semblait que la voiture roulait sur des tapis, le long de cette chaussée droite et sans fin, qu’on avait faite uniquement pour leur éviter les ruelles noires. Chaque boulevard devenait un couloir de leur hôtel. Les gaietés du soleil riaient sur les façades neuves, allumaient les vitres, battaient les tentes des boutiques et des cafés, chauffaient l’asphalte sous les pas affairés de la foule.” [Émile Zola, *La Curée*, vol. 1 of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. A. Lanoux and H. Mitterand (1872; reprint, Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 497.]

7. The title of the lead section of *The English Mail Coach* bears the title “The Glory of Motion.” See vol. 13 of *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. D. Masson (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890), 270–300. When the text first appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1849, it bore the title “The English Mail-Coach, or the Glory of Motion.” On De Quincey and the early literature of speed, see Jeffrey T. Schnapp, “Crash (Speed as Engine of Individuation),” *Modernism/modernity* 6.1 (January 1999): 1–49.

8. “Renée, la tête à la portière, resta silencieuse, regardant la foule, les cafés, les restaurants, dont la file interminable courait devant elle. Elle était devenue toute sérieuse, perdue au fond de ces vagues souhaits dont s’emplissent les reveries de femmes. Ce large trottoir que balayaient les robes des filles, et où les bottes des hommes sonnaient avec des familiarités particulières, cette asphalte grise où lui semblait passer le galop des plaisirs et des amours faciles, réveillaient ses désirs endormis, lui faisaient oublier

ce bal idiot dont elle sortait, pour lui laisser entrevoir d'autres joies de plus haut goût." [Zola, *La Curée*, 446.]

9. The ocean = crowd equation is ancient, of course, but it was recast on the newly paved surfaces of the industrial metropolis. See, for instance, such passages as "le pas de tout ce monde sur l'asphalte, c'est le grondement d'une mer"; and "la foule . . . c'était un immense flot ondulant sur l'asphalte." Edmond Goncourt and Jules Goncourt, *Journal*, vol. 2 of *Journaux*, ed. A. Ricatte (1878; reprint, Paris: Flammarion, 1959), 1203; and Gustave Flaubert, *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869; reprint, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1942), 85.

10. "Scènes de perrons d'hôtels ou des parcs héréditaires et de l'asphalte et de la grève, le monde contemporain avec sa fête qui dure toute l'année: voilà ce qui nous montrent ces rares chefs-d'oeuvre places en des main de grandes dames." [Stéphane Mallarmé, *La Dernière mode*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. H. Mondor and G.J. Aubry (1874; reprint, Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 714.]

11. "Après une ondée, l'asphalte brillant, lavé, tout plein de reflets blancs, de lueurs, d'ombres allongées comme dans l'eau." [Goncourt and Goncourt, *Journal*, vol. 1 of *Journaux*, ed. Ricatte (1863; reprint, Paris: Flammarion, 1959), 1280.] Even when they reflect upon urban filth, the Goncourts prefer the asphalt jungle to its natural counterpart: "Jamais je n'ai eu l'oeil ni le coeur plus réjoui qu'à voir ce pâté de plâtre, tout barbouillé de grandes lettres, tout sali, tout écrit et puant si bien Paris. Tout est à l'homme ici; à peine un mauvais arbre, venant mal dans une crevasse d'asphalte;—et ces laides façades me parlent comme ne me parle point la nature. Les générations de notre temps sont trop civilisées, trop perfectionnées, trop pourries, trop savantes, trop factices pour faire leur bonheur avec du vert e du bleu." [Goncourt and Goncourt, *Journal*, vol. 1, 252.]

12. "[L]es cafés seuls flambaient encore, rayant l'asphalte de nappes lumineuses." Zola, *La Curée*, 453.

13. "[T]out ce qui ne foulait pas d'un pied verni l'asphalte du boulevard." Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. R. Dumesnil (1857; reprint, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1945), 76. There is a suggestive play here on the notion of *verni* as "varnished" (as in the varnished surface of patten leather) and the word's slang meanings of "drunk," "lucky," and "immune to loss." Compare Proust, for whom more than sixty years later, the key identification is between the tarmac and the city's shimmer: "retrouver l'asphalte et tout l'éclat du monde Parisien." Marcel Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*, vol. 1 of *A la recherche des temps perdus*, ed. P. Clarac and A. Ferre (1918; reprint, Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 675.

14. "La foule gaie, palpitante, allait sous cette brume enflammée et semblait dans une apothéose. Les visages étaient dorés; les chapeaux noirs et les habits avaient des reflets de pourpre; le vernis des chaussures jetait des flammes sur l'asphalte des trottoirs." [Guy de Maupassant, *Contes et nouvelles*, ed. A.M. Schmidt and G. Delaisement (1883; reprint, Paris: Albin Michel, 1959–1960), 218.]

15. "Ce qui me semble plus beau de Paris c'est le boulevard. Chaque fois que je le traverse, quand j'arrive le matin, j'éprouve aux pieds une contraction galvanique que me donne le trottoir d'asphalte sur lequel, chaque soir, tant de putains font trainer leurs souliers et flotter leur robe bruyante. À l'heure où les becs de gaz brillent dans les glaces, où les couteaux retentissent sur les tables de marbre, j'y vais m'y promenant, paisible, enveloppé de la fumée de mon cigare et regardant à travers les femmes qui passent. C'est là que la prostitution s'étale, c'est là que les yeux brillent!—Je ne sais pas

où je vais loger.” [Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance* (1845; reprint, Paris: L. Conard, 1926–1954), 106–107.]

16. The notion of sexual friction is present even in otherwise innocent fictions such as W.S. Godwin’s *Asphalt Soliloquy*: “I bare my breast to your feet / And cover the roof o’er your head, / Dry the walls from cellar to garret complete / Then polish the shoes you tread.” Printed in T. Hugh Boorman, *Asphalts, Their Sources and Utilizations—Asphalts for Dustless Roads* (New York: Comstock, 1908), 7 (st. 5).

17. The dualism is nicely captured in Godwin’s *Asphalt Soliloquy*: “Although with pedigree somewhat mixed / . . . My place in civilization is fixed, / With my virtue and purity tried.” Boorman, st. 1, 1).

18. I am echoing W.R. Burnett’s own words in his afterword to Ben Maddow and John Huston, *The Asphalt Jungle—A Screenplay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 145: “I wanted to start the picture just as it was started in the novel, with the horrific news of the nightly toll of crime coming in over the Commissioner’s radio, the voice of the asphalt jungle.” The novel originally appeared as W.R. Burnett, *The Asphalt Jungle* (New York: A. Knopf, 1949).

19. “Du détroit d’Indigo aux mers d’Ossian, sur le sable rose et orange qu’a lavé le ciel vineux, viennent de monter et de se croiser des boulevards de cristal habités incontinent par de jeunes familles pauvres qui s’alimentent chez les fruitiers. Rien de riche. —La ville. Du désert de bitume fuient droit, en déroute avec les nappes de brumes échelonnées en bandes affreuses au ciel qui se recourbe, se recule et descend formé de la plus sinistre fumée noire que puisse faire l’Océan en deuil, les casques, les roues, les barques, les croupes. —La bataille!” [Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations*, in *Oeuvres poétiques* (1886; reprint, Paris: Flammarion, 1964), 167.]

20. Oscar Wilde, *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, 4.7 and 3.11, in *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross (1896; reprint, London: Methuen, 1909).

21. Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (1867; reprint, Hartford: American Publishing Co., 1869), 157–158.

22. “En flânant sur l’asphalte et sur le macadam, / Je gagne tous les jours trois cents francs à la bourse / L’argent coule aujourd’hui comme l’eau d’une source; / Les ouvriers maçons ont trois livres dix sous, / C’est superbe; Paris est sens dessous dessous.” [Victor Hugo, *La Stabilité est assurée*, in *Les Châtiments*, ed. P. Berret (1853; reprint, Paris: Hachette, 1932), 530.]